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ABSTRACT

Changing social attitudes of students in American schools are seen to have a direct bearing on currently declining enrollment figures in foreign language programs. The author discusses ways in which motivation can be improved. Comments are directed to the use of class time, dialogues, pattern drills, memorization, prereading experience, pronunciation training, language laboratories, filmstrips, modular scheduling, workbooks, homogeneous grouping, and individualizing instruction. (RL)

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TRENDS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE 70'S

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TRENDS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE 70'S

The first and most obvious trend which I have noted in foreign language instruction, now in the early 70's, is that of dramatically falling enrollments at the college level. The students are demanding that foreign language courses be relevant to the needs and desires of today's society.

This does not seem to be an unrealistic demand. It is most unfortunate that foreign language courses could not have been more relevant before this demand became so adamant. If our teachers at all levels would take the time to look into what makes a course relevant to today's youth, it would seem to me that they would come to the conclusion that communication, both oral and written, is absolutely vital. Today's youth has two favorite themes: peace and love. Neither one of these is possible without communication, and communication is not possible without language.

What a pleasant change it would be to find beginning and intermediate college courses dealing with basic language skills being taught by people who have really been trained to do the job, rather than to find these lower level courses being relegated to teaching assistants who have had little or no training and receive little or no salary.

To date, the secondary school has not felt the impact of these falling enrollments at the college level, but there is no doubt that it will happen, and it will happen in the very near future. Therefore, secondary teachers must begin to combat this problem now.

How to combat the problem brings in the question of personalities. There is a very high correlation between an interested, enthusiastic foreign language teacher and increasing enrollments in that teacher's courses. I have watched time and again foreign language enrollments rise and fall as a direct result of the teacher conducting the course. Materials can and should be helpful, but no matter how helpful they may be, they cannot engender enthusiasm alone.

Some of the things which help to make a class lively and interesting are the variety of materials used within each class period. No group of students should be expected to sit for a full 40 to 60 minutes and do exactly the same thing. Interest cannot be maintained. Today's youth is fickle. They have been reared with television and expect a variety of activities to hold their interest.

It would be most wise to divide every class period into segments of as little as two or three minutes, and as long as but no longer than 10 to 12 minutes for varied activities. The activities themselves can encompass such things as group participation, partial group participation, individual participation. The type of instruction should vary so that all four skills are encompassed within each class period. At some point during this individual class period, we should be concentrating on listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Let's look at some trends that I foresee during the 70's. During the 70's we will see the end of the dialogue as we now know it. Teachers and students alike have reached the point of rebellion when it comes to long dialogues, and I mean long dialogues in two ways: long in the length of the dialogue, but also, long in the length of each utterance. I foresee that the dialogue will soon become another kind of activity, simply a manipulatory activity, or perhaps even a culminating activity. But it will be changed so that the student will be thoroughly familiar with what is presented in the dialogue.

I also foresee a change in pattern drills. The pattern drill itself will have to become more realistic than has been the case in the past. A realistic stimulus must be used to elicit a realistic response. The artificiality of cueing with the pronoun in order to elicit a verb form should be replaced by a natural question. That question will then act as the cue for the appropriate response.

Pure memorization will give way to thorough familiarity. If the majority of the members of your class have become thoroughly familiar with each segment of the material, the fast students will already have brought this material to the point of memorization.

Let's talk for a minute about the prereading experience. I feel that a period without reading or writing is necessary in order to establish good pronunciation and to have students realize the importance of the spoken language. We have come a long way, however, from the point of attempting to determine in advance exactly how long this prereading period should be. There was a time when we specified a number of weeks. However, we found that after the specified number of weeks had passed, our students still made pronunciation errors, in spite of the fact that we had diligently kept them away from the written word.

Since this is the case, why not put them into the reading in order the reinforce the audio-lingual skills as soon as the body of the material is thoroughly familiar, with the idea that we will have to continue to stress good pronunciation, in spite of the fact that the written word is available to the students.

Pronunciation training is something that should continue at all levels of language learning. Certainly the basics must be stressed during the first level. This by no means insures perfect pronunciation for the remaining levels of instruction. Since the students are trained from the beginning of their school experience to recognize and respect the word in print, we must learn to capitalize on this, rather than reject it. Give them diligent, well-organized audio-lingual practice before reading, then reinforce this with the printed word and continue stressing good pronunciation and the importance of speaking the language.

In many sets of materials, after a reading selection or dialogue, there appears a set of questions. Unfortunately, to most teachers this is the obvious homework assignment. We read in class and we write the answers to the questions at home. These questions should be an indication to the teacher that this is the opportunity to have students talk about what it is they are in the process of reading. Oral reading should be interspersed with questions so that the student is guided into discussing what it is he is reading. After all questions have been done first orally, it is then possible to assign them as a written exercise.

In the 70's we will see a marked increase in the use of visual materials, just as in the 60's audio materials came to be considered an essential part of every basic foreign language program. In the 70's the visual will assume just as important a role.

The most important point to be made with the use of these teacher aids is that the teacher remember that they are merely teacher aids, not teacher replacements. Too frequently I have watched a teacher relegate himself to the role of classroom mechanic. He becomes so involved with the proper function of each machine that he forgets that his role should be far more important than that of projectionist or electrical technician.

Ideally, work with recorded material should be done daily, but for a very limited period of time -- no longer than 10 to 12 minutes. If a language laboratory is not available, it is possible simply to use a tape recorder. The teacher's

role should be to give individual assistance while the students are working with the machinery.

If a language laboratory period is assigned, attempt to get the cooperation of your department so that the students are not confronted with working in the language laboratory for an entire class period. Arrange to split the period with another class so that the students are given an opportunity to visit the laboratory more frequently, but for shorter periods of time.

As far as visuals are concerned, a visual can be of great assistance in conveying meaning without the use of English. But no matter how interesting the visual may be, if the presentation is never varied, the end result is boredom. With the filmstrip, for example, it is possible to use the filmstrip for initial presentation of vocabulary or structure, but it is also possible to use the filmstrip for review of past lessons or for oral résumés, or even for written résumés.

With most filmstrips today, it is no longer necessary to have the room completely darkened. Therefore, it is possible to show a frame on a filmstrip and ask the students to write one or two sentences describing what it is they see. These original résumés should, of course, be either corrected orally in class, or corrected on an individual basis.

Most important with the use of all audio-visuals is that the teacher not fall into the trap of doing exactly the same thing at exactly the same time every day. These should assist in giving variety to the class.

Another trend in the 70's is that of modular scheduling, which normally includes unstructured time for students. Modular scheduling reorganizes the school day into arbitrary modules, as decided by the school administration. These can range from as small as 10 to 15 minutes, to as long as 30 minutes in time. Normally, it also necessitates small group instruction and large group instruction. It will also include a time when the student must work on his own, and a time when the teacher is working with one or two students only.

In a beginning foreign language class, this can be chaotic. It necessitates serious planning on the part of the foreign language department and on the part of the individual teacher to determine what things are best handled in large

groups, what things are best handled in small groups, what things a beginning student can do on his own, and what things will necessitate individualized instruction.

Here is another area in which the audio-visuals available today can be of great assistance to the foreign language teacher. This type of scheduling will necessitate that you look at your materials to see how they can be segmented to assist both teacher and student to the most efficient learning within the limitations of modular scheduling.

Disc recordings, which are available for many sets of materials, may provide an excellent opportunity for a student to work alone, either in a learning center, in the language laboratory, in a special area set aside, or with headsets in the back of the foreign language classroom.

The workbook, which is almost as old as education itself, can fit most appropriately into individualized instruction. The student who needs extra practice with a certain concept may be assigned segments of the workbook. The fast student who is able to move ahead on his own with the assistance of audio materials and some teacher assistance may be able to reinforce his reading and writing skills through the use of the workbook.

Tests are also available in many of our modern programs. These too may be given on an individual basis, so that student "X", who has completed unit II, may be tested on his accomplishment; whereas student "Y" may have completed the next lesson, and therefore will use the next test.

All that I have just described constitutes a programmed approach to foreign language instruction. There are some programmed materials available. These may be considered. Unfortunately, many of the programs available lack in interest. Even though these materials may be selected for use, it would still be most necessary to brighten the approach in order to add interest.

Unfortunately, foreign language teachers have long been reputed to resist change. Before confronting your administration with negative points of view toward innovative scheduling, plan carefully so that your arguments are truly logical. Consider the learning situation, rather than your own comfort or discomfort. If you can factually present your

argument so that the administration will understand that your concern is to provide the best possible learning situation for your students, your argument will be more seriously considered. One of the greatest criticisms of secondary education is that teachers have never learned how to break away from "lock-step" instruction. Be sure you have given every possible thought to the feasibility of this innovative scheduling before coldly rejecting it.

Another trend which we have already seen and will continue to see is the fall of Latin enrollments. I have very few encouraging words for Latin teachers, other than the fact that they too could assist themselves in building enrollments if their courses were more interesting.

It has been noted that German enrollments are increasing. It is suspected that one reason that German is increasing is the fact that the students who want a more challenging foreign language are electing German over Latin. In many cases this has been necessitated by the fact that Latin has been eliminated from the curriculum. Although the Latin teacher is faced with a severe problem, the German teacher can take advantage of this by presenting an interesting course which will attract the student who might have chosen Latin.

The teacher who insists on utter and complete mastery of every grammatical point, no matter how obscure and with no regard for the ability of individual students, is his own worst enemy. The drop-off between levels one and two amounts to almost 50%, and continues to drop at this dramatic rate as the students advance in foreign language study. Are foreign languages that difficult, or is it that we, as foreign language teachers, are still so grammar oriented that we can't accept the fact that some students will never learn how to use double object pronouns or the subjunctive, or that some students cannot read and write effectively in their own language, let alone another language?

In our own classroom presentation of material, we should keep in mind that some students may need considerable practice before the concept ever begins to set. Other students may achieve in rapid strides. Keep in mind that review is security to many students, and that review for some may be the factor that saves them from failure.

There should be something for every student in foreign language. If the student is unable to read in English, he will in most cases be unable to read in the foreign language. This does not mean that he will be unable to speak or to understand the spoken language.

Individual differences can be provided for in heterogeneous classes. Assuredly it is more easy if our classes are homogeneously grouped. But until we all stick together and build those enrollments, we have no argument for homogeneous grouping. It is very difficult and very expensive to take 10 students and group them homogeneously. Whereas, if we are working with 100 students, the problem is less severe, less expensive and much more understandable to the administration.

The fact that so many foreign language teachers still consider their subject matter to be a discipline, in the ugliest sense of the word, contributes greatly to the phenomenal drop-out rate in foreign language study.

Many of us have lived through the dark ages of foreign language instruction, have come through the age of enlightenment of the 1960's, and now we see before us another trend. Let's hope that the handwriting on the wall can be sufficiently smeared through our interest and enthusiasm to save us from what could be another period of darkness.